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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [GB](#)

SUBJECT: ALLIES OF PRESIDENT'S SON GAIN KEY POSTS IN NEW
CABINET

REF: A. LIBREVILLE 49

[1](#)B. 05 LIBREVILLE 0329

[1](#)C. 98 LIBREVILLE 2474

Classified By: POLITICAL OFFICER GLENN FEDZER FOR REASON
1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The new cabinet announced by Prime Minister Eyeghe Ndong on January 23 rewarded all the factions which had contributed to President Bongo's reelection. The faction most favored appears to be that associated with Minister of Defense Ali Bongo, whose allies now control the national police, the conduct of elections, and oversight of the media. Other hopefuls in the eventual presidential succession sweepstakes, however, also gained strength and the contest remains wide open. End summary.

2.(C) The new cabinet announced by Prime Minister Eyeghe Ndong on January 23 represents less of a change than most had expected. It is widely viewed in Gabon as a stop-gap cabinet, appointed to serve until after the legislative elections due in November or December 2006. In assembling the cabinet, Bongo sought to reward all who helped assure his re-election. Those given key appointments include members of three major factions, referred to as "renovators," appellistes," and "caciques."

The "Renovators" Extend Their Reach

[1](#)3. (C) President Bongo's son Ali Bongo Ondimba is strengthened in the new cabinet. Ali Bongo retains the Defense portfolio cabinet, but is elevated to the rank of State Minister. In addition, a number of his allies now hold key positions. The two most significant are Andre Mba Obame, elevated from Minister of Social Welfare to Minister of State for the Interior, and Rene Ndemezo'Obiang, who remains government spokesman, but shifts portfolios from Parliamentary Relations to Communications and Telecommunications. Mba Obame now controls the National Police and the conduct of elections, while Ndemezo'Obiang controls most media outlets and a key economic sector.

[1](#)4. (C) Ali Bongo and his associate Mba Obame now control all security forces except the Republican Guard, who report directly to the President. Opposition figures claim neither will hesitate to order security forces to suppress perceived threats to the regime, using violence if necessary. Rene Ndemezo'Obiang (Minister of Telecommunications) reportedly earned his promotion thanks to his vitriolic attacks on opposition figures during the November election. Others placed in Ali's camp include Agricultural Minister Faustin Goukoubi, Commerce Minister Paul Biyoughe Mba, Culture Minister Pierre-Marie Dong, and Family Minister Martin Mabala.

The "Appellistes" Keep Their Hands on the Cookie Jar

¶5. (C) Leaders of the so-called "appellistes" faction -- Finance Minister Paul Toundji and his ally Mines, Energy, and Oil Minister Richard-Auguste Onouvié -- have both retained their posts in the new cabinet. They are linked with Presidential Advisor Jean-Pierre Lembumba Lepandou, nicknamed the "strong-box" for his role overseeing the Presidency's expenditures. Collectively, they reportedly have the power to funnel money quickly to the President, either to fund a favored project or to preserve domestic peace by financially influencing union leaders, politicians, or village leaders.

¶6. (C) Lembumba Lepandou is considered the king maker by many Gabonese analysts, and remains an implacable enemy of Ali Bongo (Lembumba believes Ali Bongo tried to assassinate him in 1992). Toundji owes his current position to Lembumba's patronage, but his marriage to Presidential daughter and Chief of Staff Pascaline Bongo provides him with an independent power base. Pascaline is reportedly the only person with the complete trust of the President, and also keeps a close eye on the budget of the Presidency.

¶7. (C) Toundji's camp reportedly include Emmanuel Ondo Methogo, a Vice Prime Minister who holds the Relations with Parliament portfolio, Minister of Small and Medium Enterprises Senturel Ngoma Madoungou, and Sports, Youth, and Leisure Minister Egide Boundono Simangoye.

The Caciques: Not Ready to Step Aside

¶8. (C) Backing some of the younger ministers, and holding important positions in their own right, are the "Caciques" (big shots), the old guard of Bongo's PDG (Gabonese Democratic Party). Their power and influence date from the early years of the Gabonese Republic. They are survivors of decades of political infighting, and have built their own empires within the system, sometimes in collaboration, but frequently in competition, with each other. They held power while Ali Bongo was still in grade school (Idriss Ngari, see para 10, has said as much publicly), and are not inclined to surrender power to a younger generation of Gabonese. Many Caciques maintain strong connections with France, and France is thought to share their opposition to the prospect of Ali Bongo's assumption of power (President Bongo once told Ambassador Walkley, "The French don't like my son").

¶9. (C) Senate President Joseph Rawiri -- along with Omar Bongo a close protégé of Gabon's first President Leon Mba -- is likely the most powerful in this group. Under the constitution he inherits interim power upon the death of the President, but his health is rumored to be poor, and he is widely believed to be happy in his current role. He is not known to harbor any Presidential ambitions, but has the institutional and personal influence to hold back those who do.

¶10. (C) Another key Cacique is Minister of Public Works Idriss Ngari, a retired General and one-time Minister of the Interior. Ngari and Ali Bongo are reportedly bitter rivals, and Ngari appears able to draw support from senior military officers and the President's own Beteke ethnic group. Ngari traveled to South Africa for medical treatment after his demotion from the Interior Ministry to Public Works in 2004, and at the time was considered too ill to be a serious rival for power. He was, alongside Ali Bongo, promoted to "Minister of State" in the new cabinet, and his health, along with his political fortunes, seems to have improved.

¶11. (C) Other Caciques in the Cabinet include Foreign Minister Jean Ping, Vice Prime Minister Louis-Gaston Mayila, Planning Minister Casimir Oye Mba, and Minister for Public Administration and State Modernization Jean-Boniface Asséle. (Asséle is described by several Embassy contacts as likely to be "the first to die" should violent regime change occur because of the long trail of aggrieved enemies he's left in

his wake.)

Mba Abessole and Bitougat Also Unpopular But Elevated

¶12. (C) Former opposition leader and widely unpopular turncoat Paul Mba Abessole has gained a promotion in the new cabinet to Vice Prime Minister, while keeping the Transportation portfolio. He has already come under fire within his own party (RBN, National Rally of Woodcutters) for failing to take his remaining supporters up with him in his climb to power. Alain-Claude Billie bi Nze, allegedly an illegitimate son of Mba Abessole, was elevated to Minister Delegate of Communication, but may be the only support Abessole can count on in the cabinet. Abessole convinced his former opposition ally Pierre-Andre Kombila to support, or at least not oppose, Omar Bongo in the last Presidential election. Kombila is now Minister of Technical Education, but is unlikely to be a reliable ally of Mba Abessole.

¶13. (C) Labor Minister Christiane Bitougat may be the most criticized choice in the current cabinet. Bitougat was President of the Teacher's Union before her elevation to the cabinet, and was widely thought to have been President Bongo's "Trojan Horse" in the labor movement. Some independent union leaders openly detest her, which will be less than helpful if the proposed privatization of Air Gabon, Gabon Telecom, and Gabon Post spark labor unrest. At a time when labor negotiations may depend on patience, mutual trust, and respect, some commentators believe that the outspoken and acerbic Bitougat is being set up for a fall by President Bongo, who will then sweep in with envelopes of money and remedy the situation.

"Geopolitics" and the Bongo System

¶14. (C) President Bongo has preserved Gabonese stability over his long time in office in part by reaching out to and

including representatives of different regions and ethnic groups; the new cabinet continues this tradition. The new Minister for the Prevention of Natural Calamities, Jean Massima, allegedly used large sums of money stolen while in government service to invest in local enterprises and building projects in his native Koulamoutou, the capital of Ogooue-Lolo province. Consequently, he is highly popular at home, explaining Bongo's decision to include him in the new cabinet.

¶15. (C) Other cabinet ministers checking regional or ethnic boxes include Housing and Urbanism State Minister Jacques Adiahenot, Vice Prime Minister Georgette Koko, Minister of Education Albert Ondo Ossa, and Prime Minister Jean Eyeghe Ndong. Eyedhe Ndong is a nephew of first President Leon Mba and, like all Prime Ministers under Bongo, comes from the Fang ethnic group, the largest in Gabon. Another member of the cabinet from the Leon Mba clan (by marriage) is Christiane Bitougat (para 13).

It's not that simple

¶16. (C) This attribution of the allegiances of different ministers obscures the ever-changing ties of family and organization binding the Gabonese elite. Many of the bitterest rivals are related by blood or have children or grandchildren in common (opposition figure Zacharie Myboto is the grandfather of two of President Bongo's many children), or are tied together ethnically or in organizations such as the Freemasons. Abessole and Kombila's reconciliation after eight years of bitter animosity is not unusual, nor is Bongo's reaching out to and including two of his most outspoken rivals.

¶17. (C) Comment: The most important question in Gabonese politics remains: Who will succeed President Bongo? The composition of the new cabinet does not provide many hints at the answer. Ali Bongo has been strengthened, but not at the expense of his rivals. The system still spreads power and resources throughout the elite, preserving stability. While

Bongo's health holds, the system should hold, but jockeying for position over the next few years will increase and introduce strains.

¶18. (C) Comment cont: In discussions of succession, Ali Bongo's name is generally the first one mentioned. Along with his name, however, come many reasons why he could not or should not succeed his father. The "disqualifications" include relatively impersonal assertions that he lacks a connection to the grassroots (he does not, for example, speak his own village language) or that France would never stand for a President Ali Bongo (he speaks excellent English and is seen by the French as too close to the US). There are also bizarre slanders circulating, including allegations that he is really Nigerian rather than Gabonese, or that he is homosexual. That no other possible candidates attract anywhere near as much "mud" is testimony to Ali Bongo's initial prominence in the succession sweepstakes.

WALKLEY

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